

MARCIA LANDY

Fascism in Film

*The Italian Commercial
Cinema, 1931-1943*



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The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1931-1943

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PREFACE

THE commercial films produced in Italy from 1931 to 1943 are a way to unlock the hearts and minds of people under fascism, to find out how ideas and images predating fascism came to roost in fascism and how attitudes prevalent under fascism persisted beyond that era. These films are also a reservoir of contradictions, and an examination of their pretexts and subtexts, their overt and covert attitudes, exposes structures of opposition to as well as support for the state apparatuses. Why then have these films not been screened or examined? Why have scholars taken no great interest in them? Histories of Italian and world film have conspicuously omitted discussion of the films of this era except to refer briefly to them as propaganda, as "telefoni bianchi" (white telephone) films, as escapist entertainment, as frivolous.

Recent critical work has challenged these commonly held views of Italian commercial cinema of the fascist years and paved the way for new readings of films produced during the "Ventennio." In 1974, a conference on Italian neorealism held in Pesaro, Italy, climaxed in a call to reevaluate the origins of the postwar Italian cinema. The conference led to a retrospective in 1975 where films of the fascist era were screened. Though it had been traditional for film scholars and critics to isolate certain film texts as "anticipations" of neorealism (e.g., *I bambini ci guardano* [The Children Are Watching Us] and *Quattro passi fra le nuvole* [A Walk among the Clouds]), no one had previously looked for neorealism's antecedents. In 1976, another conference was held at Ancona, Italy, which afforded the opportunity for an initial reappraisal of the films produced from 1931 to 1943.

Since 1976, studies have appeared primarily in Italy covering many different aspects of film production under fascism, studies of censorship, distribution, financing, the role of the Church, the status of intellectuals in the cinema, the star system, the role of criticism and of film theory during that era, and the relations between the prefascist and fascist cin-

ema. These studies stress relations to the Hollywood cinema, particularly in the nature and role of the genre film. Critics have documented Soviet influences as well as later influences from the French cinema. Additional films have been uncovered. A variety of genres—adventure films, historical dramas, comedies, melodramas, and musicals—have surfaced. Dominant directors of the period have been discussed, especially Alessandro Blasetti and Mario Camerini, and, more recently, Ferdinando Maria Poggioli. Theoretical and critical writings on the cinema have also been examined. Today, the task of the scholar and critic is made vastly simpler by these pioneering efforts.

Of the approximately 700 films produced during the fascist regime, about 300 to 350 remain, many only in negative. Other than the films at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome and the archives in Milan, these films can be located in the United States at the Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in the film archives in London, Berlin, Prague, and Budapest.

My study of the Italian cinema is based on a number of resources. First, more than one hundred of these films were made available to me at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, the film section of the Library of Congress, and the Museum of Modern Art. The pioneering work of Ted Perry in the United States and works of such Italian critics as Adriano Aprà and Patrizia Pistagnesi, Francesco Savio, Roberto Campari, Lino Micciché, but especially the studies by Gian Piero Brunetta on the history of Italian cinema, have provided documentation, a background against which to examine these films. Such studies of fascism as Nicos Poulantzas's *Fascism and Dictatorship*, Gaetano Salvemini's *The Origins of Fascism in Italy*, Ernesto Laclau's *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Togliatti's *Lectures on Fascism*, Renzo De Felice's biography of Mussolini, Victoria de Grazia's *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Adrian Lyttelton's *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929*, and the writings of Edward Tannenbaum, Philip V.

Cannistraro, and George Mosse, among others, provided me with a basis to link film production to the history of the era.

To the institutions where I screened films—the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, the film sections of the Library of Congress and of the Museum of Modern Art, to the staffs that assisted me, and to all the critics and historians, I can only repay them with my esteem. I am grateful to the Museum of Modern Art for permission to use photographs from the Stills Archive and for allowing me to reproduce frame enlargements from their *Antologia del cinema italiano, il film sonoro*. I also want to thank the University of Pittsburgh, which granted me a leave from my duties in film studies to pursue this work, provided me with a travel grant, funds for screening the films, and additional funds to defray typing expenses, and to Ruth Ann Schulte for transforming handwritten text into typed copy. I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to my colleagues, Lucy Fischer, Dana Polan, Maridina Salvatori, and to Victoria de Grazia for their careful and patient reading and commenting on various versions of the manuscript. I am most indebted to Stanley Shostak, colleague and collaborator on many film projects, for his challenging criticism and for his encouragement. I assume full responsibility for the final text as I do for the translations from the Italian.

Pittsburgh
February 1985

Fascism in Film

INTRODUCTION

Remembrance of Things Past

MOST film critics and filmgoers have formed an impression of the Italian commercial cinema from such silent films as *Quo Vadis* and from postwar neorealist films. A long period in the production of Italian feature films from the beginnings of sound to the end of World War II has not had any impact on our understanding of Italian cinema. I am well aware in writing about the films produced in Italy from 1931 to 1942 that most of my readers will have seen few, if any, of these films and may be inclined to dismiss them as propaganda. My book is intended to address this oversight and change some of these impressions.

The postwar Italian cinema is identified with the movement known as "neorealism," whose major project was the demystification of the ideology and practices of fascism. Such familiar films as *Open City*, *Paisan*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Shoe Shine* confronted the effects of fascism. In their content, they explored authoritarianism; bureaucracy and power; violence; consensus and conformity; the oppression of workers, and passive obedience to tradition, the law, and the state. In their style, they sought to develop a film language that was critical of the formalism, hermeticism, and escapism which they felt characterized the cultural practices under fascism. The neorealist cinema sought to create a language to embody its critique and to communicate a sense of new cultural imperatives. Neorealism, as the name suggests, "reclaimed the territory of reality, and in that reclamation denied the claims of past filmmaking while announcing itself as a beginning for filmmaking to come."¹ Filmmakers sought a way of structuring cinema through the use of real images and events. The desired

¹ Robert Philip Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 17.

style was improvisational, journalistic, and colloquial. The cinema was to be more sociological than overtly political, stressing hunger, poverty, domestic relations, and social class.

In their zeal to regenerate Italian cultural practices, the neo-realists created their own myths. The most blatant myth was the myth of "newness," of "beginning." Although the neo-realists sought to examine the nature of fascism, they obscured their own beginnings in the fascist era. For example, before 1945, films had indeed been made on location; the use of nonprofessional actors was not uncommon; and the reclamation of reality had already begun.² In their rejection of what had gone before, the neorealist filmmakers and critics eliminated an important resource for understanding the very issues they claimed to study, namely, the ways in which fascism was able to gain support and adherents.

The preceding cinema became the "skeleton in the closet," as Lino Micciché has described it,³ thereby creating a lacuna in the history of Italian cinema. If history is a reminder of necessity, the forgetting of this history does not make it disappear,⁴ nor does it in any way ensure that it will not recur. By underrating the "Italian cinema which was rebuilding itself

² Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: Fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), pp. 91-98. See also Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1972), pp. 79-84; Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), pp. 23-25; Franco Venturini, "Origins of Neo-Realism," in *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-Realism*, ed. David Overbey (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), pp. 169-97; Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy: From 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 12-16. Gian Piero Brunetta discusses Nino Martoglio's *Sperduti nel buio* (Lost in the Darkness, 1914) and *Teresa Raquin* (1915) as exemplary texts of the Neapolitan school of filmmaking which utilized the external locale of Naples. In discussions of the development of neorealism, these films have been cited as harbingers of the realist aesthetic. *Storia del cinema italiano 1895-1945* (Rome: Riuniti, 1979), p. 166.

³ Lino Micciché, "Il cadavere nell' armadio," in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Riccardo Redi (Venice: Marsilio, 1979), pp. 9-18.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 100-101.

around classical genres like the comedy and melodrama," the neorealist aesthetic also underrated the role of popular cinema in the formation of ideology.⁵ Adriano Aprà and Patrizia Pistagnesi have suggested that "the suppression of the 1929-43 cinema on the part of traditional critics was always more of a conspiracy of silence than an ideologically motivated refutation; it hid a diffidence, not so much toward the fascism of these films as toward their character as spectacles, and, in the final analysis, toward film as the product of a collective imagination."⁶ My examination of the cinema of the thirties and early forties proceeds on the assumption that these films have a great deal to teach about the discourse of fascism and how the subject was situated within it.

According to Aprà and Pistagnesi, when the films of the Ventennio were viewed at the Ancona retrospective, the critics were surprised that they "hold up so well with time, that the *average* quality (typical of the film industry) was so high, and above all that from these films is extracted an image of Italian reality—with all the mediations of a cinema tied to the classical rules of the spectacle—different and above all more complex than the simplifications of traditional histories . . . had led one to believe."⁷

The "reality" alluded to by Aprà and Pistagnesi refers to the diverse ways these films, like their Hollywood counterparts, found to "give the audience what it wants," rather than specializing in a programmatic approach.⁸ While it is the case that films such as *Lo squadrone bianco*, *Alcazar*, *Scipione l'Africano*, *Vecchia guardia*, and *Camicia nera* reveal the familiar and public face of fascism with its emphasis on national destiny,

⁵ Adriano Aprà and Patrizia Pistagnesi, *Notes on the Unknown Italian Cinema* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The "repressive tolerance of the fascist regime," notes Edward R. Tannenbaum, "was actually more insidious and corrupting than the overt inhumanity of the Nazis. The latter is not likely to reappear as a danger; the former might." *Fascism in Italy: Society and Culture 1922-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p. 4.

power, conquest, sacrifice, hero worship, and the objectification of the masses, along the lines of Susan Sontag's discussion of "fascinating fascism,"⁹ the Italian films have important links to the Hollywood adventure films and historical dramas in their subordination of message to entertainment.

The films are instructive about the subtle ways in which people's needs and desires were managed. The cinema of the era was, in fact, a family cinema. The narratives and their imagery were built on the foundation of sexual difference, on an ahistorical discourse (even where they appear most historical) that arises from biological categories: young and old people, men and women, nature. Natural conflicts were pitted against social conflicts in an attempt to repress and redirect concrete historical and economic considerations. The films play on fears of chaos, irresolution, and the unknown. They offer a vision of a world where anxieties are mastered. The desire for change is gratified through the appearance of change.

But the films are not mute about their strategies. Even where the narratives seem to be most exemplary of ideology talking to itself, they expose themselves. When they are working hardest to create a sense of shared attitudes and community, they appear to parody the very things they endorse. In certain instances, especially in the comedies and melodramas, the films appear almost consciously to express opposition, though this opposition must be read as ambiguous, if not contradictory. In any case, in order to be successful, the cinema had to make contact with the experiences of its audience, and this entailed the creation of a popular cinema based on commonly shared images.

A close examination of the history and nature of film production in Italy during the fascist years forces a revision of the idea that under fascism every aspect of life was controlled by the dominant state apparatus and that this control always manifested itself in overtly coercive fashion. Even under fas-

⁹ Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 31-43.

cism, consent was necessary.¹⁰ Although it is true that in the early twenties, the fascist movement had no clear and positive program and it was, as Angelo Tasca has claimed, “*not organizing but disorganizing the masses.*”¹¹ By the middle twenties the regime began to address the development of strategies for wooing the masses, strategies that were “not so different from those faced elsewhere in Europe by liberal-democratic regimes in the process of stabilizing their rule.”¹² As Victoria de Grazia cautions, though the Italian fascist regime sought to develop organizations and policies designed to promote consensus, its form of creating consent must be differentiated from those of liberal democratic governments, since under fascism “force was both the premise and the constant threat.”¹³ Nonetheless, as a study of the commercial films demonstrates, the regime sought increasingly to appeal to all classes, to create a sense of collective social endeavor, to make the “new order” attractive through the development of cultural forms aimed at penetrating all forms of social life: the family, the workplace, and even leisure activities.¹⁴ The fascist cultural “revolution” envisioned the transformation of the daily interior life of the worker.¹⁵

The regime was slow in developing the commercial cinema as an apparatus that could serve these ends. Only gradually did the notion of cinema as a vehicle for creating a “popular culture” emerge, and with it the development of narratives, themes, and images geared to a vision of a new and modern

¹⁰ According to Adrian Lyttelton, “Mussolini gave frequent assurances that literature and the arts should remain free and not subject to political control.” *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 380.

¹¹ Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1919-1922* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1966), p. 25.

¹² Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Anna Panicali, “L'intellettuale fascista,” in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Redi, pp. 29-50.

¹⁵ Renzo De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to Its Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Ledeen (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1976), p. 55.

society, a society in the throes of industrialization and modernization. This struggle for change manifested itself in the contradictory and ambiguous visions of "reality" that emerge in the films of the thirties and early forties, contradictions and ambiguities not far removed from internal ideological conflicts of culture and politics under fascism.¹⁶ It has been a critical disservice merely to dismiss the film production of the thirties as escapist and to accord exclusive attention to those texts that seem overtly monumental and, hence, "fascist" or to those that signal the emergence of the neorealist aesthetic.

This study argues that these "escapist" films, admittedly less popular with Italian audiences than their Hollywood counterparts of the era, deserve attention because in them one finds images, attitudes, and values that can help to alter, expand, and redefine the nature of fascist ideology. The image of the fictional world that emerges from a study of these films is a profoundly eclectic one, touching on central aspects of everyday reality—the nature of sexual roles, the family, work, the physical environment, the conflict between rural and urban values. For the most part, the films strive to reconcile class and sexual differences, to reaffirm the importance of the family, and to exalt a sense of national identity couched in a progressive rhetoric, one that uses history to legitimate tradition or change, but, in so doing, the films, stylized and artificial as they may seem, reveal conflicts and offer the

¹⁶ See de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*; Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy*; George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980). Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: Fascismo e mass media* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1975); Palmiro Togliatti, *Lectures on Fascism* (New York: International Publishers, 1973); Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism*; Gaetano Salvemini, *The Origins of Fascism in Italy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Giovanni Mira and Luigi Salvatorelli, *Storia d'Italia nel periodo fascista*, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1970); Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism* (London: NLB, 1974); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1977); De Felice, *Fascism*; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista*, vol. 1: *La conquista del potere 1921-1925* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966) and Mihaly Vajda, *Fascism as Mass Movement* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1976).

viewer a sense of the nature and the irreconcilability of these conflicts.

At the beginning of the fascist era, the film industry was in disarray. The development, in fact the rebuilding, of the Italian film industry was a formidable task, as formidable as the problems of capitalization and modernization in other sectors of industry the regime attempted to revamp.¹⁷ At one time, Italy had been a pioneer in the production of feature films and was therefore not bereft of expertise, interest, and a sense of direction. In the early silent era, Italian films not only had great domestic currency but were influential and lucrative export items. According to Jack C. Ellis, "the Italians' inclinations were toward historical and religious spectacles set in their own glorious past."¹⁸ These films, moreover, had an impact on early American film production. D. W. Griffith, in particular, emulated the form and style of some of these historical epics. However, in the early twenties, due to a combination of economic and social factors, the industry experienced devastating financial decline. Among the factors contributing to this decline were disorganized forms of production, industrial improvisation to "plug the holes," production costs rising to staggering heights, an almost complete lack of foreign markets, arrested development both technologically and creatively, and, above all, competition from the Hollywood cinema.¹⁹ The problems went far deeper than economic underdevelopment. As James Hay has suggested, "Italy's lack of technology was not as responsible for the demise of the industry during the twenties as were the insipid the-matics of the movies, coupled with the growing attractiveness of American images."²⁰

The old historical epic form and style no longer attracted audiences. Nonetheless, Italian filmmakers continued to

¹⁷ Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy*, pp. 100-120.

¹⁸ Jack C. Ellis, *A History of Film* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), p. 52.

¹⁹ Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*, pp. 15-28.

²⁰ James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

mount archaic and expensive productions in an attempt to regain the success of such films as *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Cabiria*, and *Quo Vadis*. The Italian star system (*Il divismo*) intensified financial losses, since stars continued to demand exorbitant salaries for films that had little likelihood of making a profit.²¹ If the industry was to survive it had to confront its obsolescent practices and meet the challenges of cultural economic change either through new private initiatives or with the assistance of the government. Initially the government was reticent. According to Philip V. Cannistraro, the first intervention of the regime was administrative rather than financial.²² In the early twenties, the government reaffirmed the 1913 censorship guidelines prohibiting films that offended private morality and public decency; contained scenes that were violent, cruel, repugnant, or perverse; disturbed the public order; or damaged the authority or prestige of public officials. No new and explicit rules were laid down to politicize the cinema in the interests of promoting fascist ideals.²³ Mussolini created a commission to oversee the implementation of the censor's guidelines. No major changes occurred until 1934 when the regime began to act more aggressively to spread fascist ideas and the office of censorship was moved to the Ministry of Press and Propaganda.²⁴

In 1924, the regime created Istituto LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa), which was to produce documentaries and newsreels and to screen and censor foreign newsreels.²⁵ In the course of a few years, LUCE succeeded in managing public information in monopolistic fashion. Through the *cinegiornali*, the newsreels, the regime imposed itself in a significant way on the arena of mass communication.

²¹ Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*, p. 19.

²² Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, pp. 274-80.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275. See also *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Film*, vol. 3 (New York: Times Press, 1984).

²⁵ Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano 1895-1945*, pp. 236-39. See also Elaine Mancini, *The Free Years of the Italian Film Industry 1930-1935* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1981).

LUCE was designed as the propaganda arm of the regime and as such received financial support.

In the sector of commercial film production, the picture was quite different. The situation was, to echo Edward Tannenbaum, "scandalous." Commercial film producers received no assistance from the regime: "The Italian market was dominated by American productions which conquered the world during the era of silent film, while the Italian industry all but died for want of capital and up-to-date methods and themes."²⁶

The only significant attempt to revivify and restructure the ailing industry came from private initiative, particularly through the efforts of Stefano Pittaluga. In 1925, he convened a congress of film producers, businessmen, and distributors which articulated a series of proposals for the improvement of production and distribution. In the following year, Pittaluga assumed control of the UCI (Unione Cinematografica Italiana). He absorbed smaller companies, centralized operations, modernized the technology and production methods, and attempted to rationalize the relationship of foreign to domestic products without drastically curtailing imports. Ultimately, his company, the Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, became the Cines-Pittaluga Company that, according to Peter Bondanella, "would eventually form the basis of the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC) which the government formed in 1935 to direct the entire industry."²⁷ Moreover, the government gave Pittaluga the franchise to distribute LUCE films, an action that signified an initial movement of cooperation between the regime and private enterprise. Pittaluga's policies provided the future direction for the industry and were maintained after his death in 1931 under the leadership of Emilio Cecchi, head of the Cines studio (later Cinecittà), and Luigi Freddi, who assumed the position of director general of cinematography in 1934.

In 1931, the regime again intervened with a series of pro-

²⁶ Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy*, p. 269.

²⁷ Bondanella, *Italian Cinema*, p. 12.

tectionist measures designed to stem the overwhelming competition from Hollywood and to enhance Italian production. A quota system was initiated, which stipulated that for every ten films programmed in theaters, there must be one Italian film. Furthermore, foreign films that were not dubbed in Italian were prohibited. In 1934, the government attempted to institute the practice of taxing foreign films produced in Italy and rechanneling the funds to Italian producers. In this same year, the regime began to offer prizes for films that were deemed to be of high artistic quality, and the appointment of Luigi Freddi as director general of cinematography initiated what became known as the "Freddi era," associated with the "white telephone" films.²⁸ Freddi's approach was characterized by measures aimed at modernization of the industry along Hollywood lines and a production policy that favored entertainment over propaganda. His attitude toward cinema was shared by Giuseppe Bottai, the minister of culture, who asserted:

The government has wanted to aid the industry in a specific activity which is to resist foreign industry, and to bring to our market some films of plot, variety, and imagination, which constitute a powerful attraction to the public. I go rarely to the cinema, but I have always believed that the public is invariably bored when the cinema wants to educate it. The public wants to be entertained, and it is precisely on this terrain that we wish today to aid the Italian cinema.²⁹

Supporting this position, Freddi prophesied: "Today the certainty is born that in a very short time, the Italian fascist will have his say in the cinematic arena. It will be a word that will serve the hour in which we live."³⁰

Freddi played a significant role in redesigning the structure of the Italian cinema. Recognizing the need for more experimentation, more professionalism, better scripts and acting,

²⁸ Adriano Aprà, "Linee di politica cinematografica da Blasetti a Freddi," in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Redi, pp. 107-115.

²⁹ Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 308. See Vittorio Mussolini, "In cerca della formula," *Cinema 2* (10 February 1937), pp. 34-41.

³⁰ Massimo Mida and Lorenzo Quaglietti, *Dai telefoni bianchi al neorealismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1980), p. 20.

and film education, he laid the groundwork for the development of a popular cinema. Bottai's and Freddi's pronouncements corroborate the heavily commercial orientation of both the government and private industry at this time, the fact that the development of a popular cinema was motivated more by economic than by ideological considerations. The films that received government prizes were not necessarily those that exalted fascism but rather those that demonstrated box-office appeal. Indoctrination and propaganda took a back seat to profit. Threaded through Freddi's discussion are references to the importance of competition, professional excellence, international acclaim, the concrete problem of increasing public attendance at films, reducing imports, especially from the United States, and proper forms of protection for national film products while at the same time satisfying the demand for films. As part of the effort to modernize the industry, representatives of the Italian industry visited European capitals in order to glean methods for enhancing Italian production. They also visited the United States to study the American film industry. Joint production companies were formed with French, German, and Hungarian companies, and American filmmakers such as Frank Capra were invited to Italy prior to the outbreak of the war to share their expertise with Italian directors and producers.

The creation of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935 was intended to improve the quality of film production. The Centro was conceived of as a cultural resource, containing a school, library, and cinematheque. The institution sponsored the publication of a journal and of books on the cinema. Under the leadership of Luigi Chiarini, such directors as Alessandro Blasetti and writers as Umberto Barbaro worked and taught. According to Chiarini, the aims of the Centro were to raise the technical and cultural level of filmmaking through experimentation in film production methods and the development of appropriate film theory and criticism.³¹ Toward the latter half of the thirties, the Centro became a locus for nonfascist intellectuals who articulated new

³¹ Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, pp. 317-19.

trends in filmmaking, trends that were to become associated later with antifascism and with the neorealist aesthetic. Massimo Mida, Giuseppe De Santis, Luigi Zampa, Mario Alicata, and Cesare Zavattini were representative of the critics who called for new directions. Although Chiarini himself subscribed to fascist ideals he demonstrated extraordinary openness to experimentation and even toleration of oppositional tendencies.³²

The near-doubling of Italian film production during the next five years was also enhanced by the intervention of the IRI (Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale), a state-created organization for the investment of funds in the private sector whereby loans and subsidies were granted to film producers and distributors. As an incentive to promote film production, the government offered awards to certain films. Such films as *Squadrone bianco* (White Squadron) and *Scipione l'africano* (Scipio Africanus) received funding on the grounds that they fostered fascist ideals and had wide box-office appeal. The regime's investment climbed from 18 million lire in 1934 to 71 million by 1937.³³ As a consequence of the greater state and private cooperation, operations in the film industry became more streamlined, and films that presented new images of contemporary social life began to appear.

By 1938, the nature and status of Italian commercial film production had changed. More films were being made. The feature films had improved both technically and stylistically, and box-office receipts were on the increase. The regime had by now committed itself more fully to the film industry. Mussolini inaugurated the newly built Cinecittà, modeled along the lines of Hollywood as a facility that could support a full cycle of film production. Moreover, the threat by the regime to close off American imports was finally materialized. The German-Italian alliance and the 1938 Alfieri law succeeded in drastically reducing American films.³⁴ Furthermore, in an ef-

³² See Luigi Chiarini, *Cinematografo* (Rome: Cremonese, 1935) and *Cinque capitoli sul film* (Rome: Italian Editions, 1941).

³³ Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 293.

³⁴ Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, pp. 396-97.

fort at centralization in 1941, the government attempted through legislation to limit production companies. The object was to eliminate inferior productions and to reduce credit to film companies, thus effectively leaving the way open for the larger, more profitable producers. The regime and the film industry did not want to limit the number of films produced, but rather to stabilize the continuing crises in the film industry through greater centralization. Nonetheless, in 1940, eighty-three films were produced by forty-seven companies, and in the following year eighty-nine were produced by fifty-four companies.³⁵ Moreover, new theaters were opened in 1940 in rural areas and films were needed to supply these theaters.³⁶

The critical writings in the thirties corroborate changes in direction. The dominant journals were *Lo schermo*, *Bianco e nero*, *Critica fascista*, *Intercine*, and *Cinema*. In these journals, in the contemporary histories of film, and in the film criticism of the time, one can trace the vicissitudes of fascism. For example, in the early years, writers were concerned to emphasize the role that film could play in relation to the growth of fascism. Articles and reviews addressed the nature and roles of the Hollywood cinema, particularly the work of such directors as Frank Capra. It is not surprising that the American film should receive attention, given its popularity with Italian audiences and given the Italian film industry's struggle to regenerate itself along American lines. What is surprising, however, is the influence of the Soviet style of filmmaking (Blasetti's *1860* is a notable example).³⁷ This tendency emanated most conspicuously from the "fascists of the left" whose interest was in a vision of fascism as a new and revolutionary movement. Soviet montage in the films of the era was not indicative of adherence to Marxist theory and practice but a recognition of the effectiveness of montage in the treatment of "epic" subjects, of historical events, and of mass action. The Soviet influence was never as dominant as the American

³⁵ Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, p. 298.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*, pp. 67-73.

or even the Hungarian. The practice of assimilating foreign models and styles was always regarded with some caution, for fear of overwhelming Italian cultural concerns, but the incorporation of foreign techniques was ultimately to produce films with an apparent Italian content, films that, to quote Freddi, constituted "art for the people."

Toward the end of the thirties, critics such as Umberto Barbaro, Luchino Visconti, Giuseppe De Santis, and Carlo Lizzani encouraged dialogues about "realism," reacting against the "artificiality" of the cinema of genres.³⁸ The journal articles on scripting, acting, and especially the reviews of foreign and Italian films were the media through which reaction against existing film production grew. In the years from 1941 to 1943, this discourse became more insistent. Films that displayed realist tendencies were discussed and identified as models. The appearance of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* in 1942 was part of this tendency. Visconti himself had written articles about Giovanni Verga in the journal, *Cinema*, the dominant forum associated with these ideas. In the pages of *Cinema*, articles on Verga, American fiction, the films of Jean Renoir, and Italian films revealed the growing predilection for the realist mode. The essays registered negative reactions against the films of evasion.

The critics and filmmakers associated with *Cinema* are evidence of oppositional tendencies at work in the film industry in the later years of fascism. The dialogue over realism was, in part, an attempt to make contact with prefascist literary and ideological movements and to develop new cultural models for the future based on European and American writers and filmmakers. The critical essays in *Cinema* demonstrate changes in attitudes toward film and social reality in the late 1930s and early 1940s. They also reveal that the rejection of the genre cinema was based on style as well as content.

³⁸ Mida and Quaglietti, *Dai telefoni bianchi al neorealismo*, pp. 183-270. For example, while a critic like De Santis might feel ambivalent about some of Poggioli's work, he praised Blasetti's *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, *L'uomo dalla croce* by Rossellini, and such works of De Sica's as *Un garibaldino al convento* and *Teresa Venerdì* as being more open, less hermetic.

An analysis of the genre films offers an insight into the workings of mass culture, how subjects are situated within ideological formations and how these processes are effected within the text and in relation to the audiences.³⁹ According to Thomas Schatz, the genre film should be considered "not only as some filmmaker's artistic expression, but further as the cooperation between artists and audience in celebrating their collective values and ideals. In fact, many qualities traditionally viewed as artistic shortcomings—the psychologically static hero, for instance, or the predictability of the plot—assume a significantly different value when examined as components of a genre's ritualistic narrative system."⁴⁰ One of the primary characteristics of the cinema of genres is its formulaic nature. The narratives are dependent on a predictable progression, moving from conflict, through elaboration of conflict, to resolution. The context of the genre film is not a historical society (though the film will be embedded in some historical context), but an idealized community. This community will be presented in formulaic fashion, identified through the characters who are representatives of the community, through a use of space and place in indeterminate fashion, and through "certain dramatic conflicts that we associate with specific patterns of action and character relationships."⁴¹ The actors in the conflicts are not individualized but linked to a fixed iconography, their actions more often related to magical and mythic agencies than to logic.

Because these narratives belong to the realm of the folk tale or romance, they appear to be dissociated from their cultural and social milieu and have been accordingly judged as escapist, but their origins in popular storytelling, their relationship to collective forms of representation, their very formulaic and stylized qualities, their basis of appeal to mass audiences, suggest that these works, in their style and content, have

³⁹ Sergio Grmek Germani, "Introduzione a una ricerca sui generi," in *Cinema italiano sotto il fascismo*, ed. Redi, pp. 81-98.

⁴⁰ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

profound roots in shared cultural attitudes. In their unchanging and changing aspects, the genre films address cultural consensus, if not modes of subversion to consent, and, hence, provide a vehicle for identifying and understanding how ideology functions.

These genre films, in spite of or perhaps because of their conventions and rules, yield information about the ways in which real needs are transformed into the created needs, about the way desire is managed. Their "escapist" dimension can be analyzed in more complex terms as the consequence of myth, fantasy, and necessity, accessible to the critic through a reading of the films' motifs, conventions, and cinematic language. Moreover, as can be seen in the development of the film genres through the thirties and early forties, these films are not mere reproductions of each other and of unchanging attitudes. The Italian melodramas, for example, reveal a sensitivity to changing attitudes, and finally even subtle opposition to the "heroic" and "revolutionary" discourse associated with the early phases of fascist ideology.

Ideology is not a mere cloak for reality, a form of false consciousness that disappears when material reality changes. The reduction of ideology to a category of false consciousness misrepresents the substantial role that images, attitudes, and beliefs play in maintaining social conditions and, therefore, hampers the possibility of critically evaluating the importance of cultural formations in sustaining social reality. Conversely, the assumption that ideology is all-encompassing negates the possibility that any social action is possible.

Ideology is a force for legitimating existing societies, their institutions and way of life. When ideology is widely accepted as describing "the way things are," it can be considered as hegemonic, as having a dominant position in a society.⁴² Traditionally, ideological practices have been linked to official political rhetoric, to the practices of the state, but they per-

⁴² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1978), pp. 260-261. See also Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 108-136.

meate areas of everyday existence seemingly most remote from the public sphere.⁴³ Ideology seems to be most effective where it appears least obvious, least coercive, least ideological, and more as a natural process that enables people to function and to survive. A submission to the status quo must, therefore, be accounted for in terms of a "more general process of representation through which individuals are recruited into a social order. . . . The places or positions represented and the sense of self represented by the dominant social order must appear to be desirable; we must want to be recognized in that place, in that image we take to be our-selves."⁴⁴ The popular Italian cinema of the Ventennio, especially those feature films described as escapist, therefore have much to communicate about fascist culture. Rather than being removed from Italian reality, they are a good indication of how that reality was constructed.

My approach to an analysis of the films' ideological discourse is dependent on recent work in genre theory. In my analysis of the films, I explore the various strategies employed as part of the textual system of genre narratives from the role of the director and the stars to the conventions and rules associated with genres. For example, directors were, as in the Hollywood cinema, associated with certain genres and from their works audiences could expect a definable style tied to predictable thematic preoccupations. Mario Camerini (1895-) made a few films during the silent era and the postwar period, but his most distinctive and popular work was done between 1929 and 1943. He is associated predominantly with romantic comedies. Another filmmaker whose films span the silent era to the present, Alessandro Blasetti (1900-), made historical films, adventure films, and melodramas. Carmine Gallone (1886-1973) was known for his spectaculars. Having directed the famous *Scipione l'africano*, the ultimate in films that sought to connect contemporary fascism to the Roman

⁴³ Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

past, he also applied his flair for spectacle toward directing films that featured operas and opera singers.

One of the most neglected and interesting directors of melodrama, Ferdinando Maria Poggioli (1897-1945), directed such films as *Gelosia* (Jealousy) and *Sorelle Materassi* (The Materassi Sisters). Augusto Genina (1892-1957), another of the "epic" filmmakers of the period, also directed documentaries, war films, and melodramas. His *L'assedio dell' Alcazar* (The Siege of the Alcazar), made in a high rhetorical style, was designed to celebrate the Falangist cause during the Spanish Civil War. Raffaele Matarazzo (1909-1966), Mario Soldati (1906-), Renato Castellani (1913-), and Luigi Chiarini (1900-1975) were all identified with the movement known as "calligraphism," films that utilized earlier literary texts, melodramas especially, and were presented in a highly stylized manner.

Vittorio De Sica (1901-1974) began his film career as an actor. He starred in many of Mario Camerini's comedies. In the early forties he began directing, with a penchant for romantic comedy and melodrama, influenced perhaps by Camerini, his mentor. Amleto Palermi (1889-1941) directed melodramas such as *La peccatrice* (The Sinner), *Cavalleria rusticana*, and *Napoli d'altri tempi* (Naples of Other Times).

While the director endows the genre conventions with a particular signature in style and theme, the star occupies an equally important position as the embodiment of the particular conflicts and fantasies represented, and Italian films increasingly became star vehicles. But though the sound film created new star images, these actresses never had the same charisma and appeal of such silent divas as Lydia Borelli. Furthermore, Italian stars were never as popular with audiences as Hollywood stars. Audiences continued to elevate such figures as Charles Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Fred Astaire, and Deanna Durbin. The physical appearance of certain Italian stars and the kinds of roles they play often resemble Hollywood types and stereotypes.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Roberto Campari, *Hollywood-Cinecittà: Il racconto che cambia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980), pp. 128-65.

Luisa Ferida was the incarnation of fiery passion, often cast as outlaw, peasant, or wronged lover. Osvaldo Valenti, who often performed with her, was the suave villain, false counselor, traitor, or usurper, in Blasetti's films in particular. Isa Miranda, the Italian version of Marlene Dietrich, played a variety of roles but most often that of the seductress as in Max Ophul's *La signora di tutti* (Everyone's Woman). She could also play a more sedate role as devoted daughter, wife, and mother as she did in *Passaporto rosso* (Red Passport). In contrast to Isa Miranda's cold, unattainable, and oppressed women, Assia Noris's roles were light, witty, and playful. Often forced for a time to fend for herself until she finds a proper mate, she was competent and eventually triumphant. Elsa Merlini was associated with musicals and comedies, playing the ambitious secretary or the clever wife.

Fosco Giachetti, veteran of such films as *Squadron bianco* (White Squadron), *Vecchia guardia* (The Old Guard), *L'assedio dell' Alcazar* (The Siege of the Alcazar), and *Scipione l'africano*, was the exemplar of the fascist hero, but he was also popular in melodramas, having acted in such films as Mattòli's *Luce nelle tenebre* (Light in Darkness) and Castellani's *Un colpo di pistola* (A Pistol Shot). His character was moral, serious, disciplined; in short, he was the ideal "man's man." Though he was capable of deep attachments, his first commitment was to public duty. De Sica himself described the character parts he played for Camerini in the following manner: "The characters in Camerini, in this case, bourgeois or petty bourgeois, were delicate with a certain grace."⁴⁶ De Sica played roles with "light irony, melancholy even" whether as the desperate millionaire ready to give away his money or as the taxi driver acting like a millionaire.

An analysis of the role of the "star" and of the types of roles available provides valuable insight about genre representation, but this book is not a formalist analysis of genres. While according prominence to the role of genre, I situate my discussion of these narratives in the context of the films' treat-

⁴⁶ Francesco Savio, *Cinecittà anni trenta*, 3 vols. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), 2:486.

ment of generational and gender conflict. The first section of the book, "Generation and Gender," explores the representation of youth, of men, and of women in a variety of genres—musicals, adventure films, comedies, historical films, and melodramas. My rationale for an analysis of generational and gender representation is twofold: to identify the dominance of such a biological discourse under fascism and also to demonstrate how such a discourse is a force in the presentation of "the way things are."

Given the prominence of the fascist rhetoric devoted to youth, the first chapter, "The Children Are Watching Us," examines the various representations of young people and explores the reality and fiction of youth as a signifier of new cultural and aesthetic directions. In the early thirties young people, particularly young men, are fired with enthusiasm and, as in Alessandro Blasetti's *Vecchia guardia* (1935), ready to bring the "revolution" into existence and destroy the old moribund institutions. They are willing to endure hardship, personal sacrifice, and even death. Often young people are portrayed in the context of schools and orphanages where they battle to liberate themselves from sterile and repressive conditions. Children are the agents in uniting the family, sometimes at the expense of their own lives. In the films of the forties, however, children are used to dramatize the breakdown of domestic life, though they may be powerless to avert disaster, as in De Sica's *I bambini ci guardano*. Generational conflict seems to be a continuous motif, often standing in for or replacing class conflict.

The second chapter examines representations of women with particular attention to patterns of courtship, love and eroticism, work and domesticity, conflicts between career and marriage, and the common image of woman as "entertainer." The women's roles in the films offer an insight into a range of available female archetypes. Women are portrayed as seductresses, fallen women, entertainers, aspiring white-collar workers, long-suffering wives and mothers, obedient daughters, and unequal comrades in the enterprise of war and imperialism. The common bond uniting these diversified images

of women is service, and, whether they succeed or fail, their object in life is to enhance the male and the family. In the melodramas, their role becomes central as they are shown to represent the failure of conventional social and interpersonal structures. Sexuality becomes the dominant signifier of repressed and distorted relationships. In Visconti's *Ossessione*, a pointed critique of the positioning of the subject in fascist ideology, the woman's sexuality becomes the vehicle for the male's enslavement to eroticism and exposes the ways this eroticism is manipulated in order to legitimate family and property.

In the third chapter, I probe the dominant images of men in the films of the thirties in the context of a quasi-religious pattern of conversion. The men, whether aristocrats, entrepreneurs, soldiers, professional men, workers, adventurers, or opportunists, are portrayed in the context of competition with other men, vocation, service and sacrifice, or domestication. The conversion motif portrays men struggling against lack of direction, passivity, loss of identity, dissipation, or falsely motivated desire. The men undergo a series of frustrations and trials until they are reconciled to a "virile," active, and self-assured image of themselves and of social responsibility. Soldiers find their identity in a contemplation of death and transfiguration through war and national goals; aristocrats (as in Blasetti's films), in patriarchal responsibility to their subjects; workers, in work and in the gratifications of family. Conversely, the films of the early forties cast a dark light on these objectives, dramatizing the dissolution of the personality, the destructiveness of competition, the failure of "normal" familial and sexual relationships, the threatening image of impotence, and the ubiquitousness of violence and aggressive images of male domination. The world of these films bears striking similarity to the themes and images of *film noir*.

In the second section of the book, "Genres," I turn to the historical film, comedy, and melodrama to explore the ways in which the uses of history, the role of work and leisure, and the presentation of the family are encoded in the films

of the era as well as the ways in which the films reveal changing attitudes over the course of the thirties and early forties. In Chapter Four, I examine how the historical film adapts a diversity of themes and attitudes that relate to the public and the private spheres, accounting for the popularity of historical subjects, settings, and costume dramas. Films set in Roman times were made, but by far the more prominent periods portrayed were the Renaissance and Risorgimento, particularly the latter.

The films used history as thinly veiled allegories for the present, as political parables, as moral exempla, as presentations of the "great man" view of history, and as spectacle. The historical drama offers variations on the theme of past glory and splendor to be emulated in the present, the struggle to legitimize nationalism, the continuity between past and present, the exaltation of militarism, and the emphasis on the need for struggle and victory. Historical treatments united pedagogy and entertainment, concealing didacticism in spectacle, but in some films, the historical and costume drama might also encode a subtle critique of the status quo not acceptable to the regime or in particular the censors. Such popular actors as Gino Cervi, Osvaldo Valenti, Luisa Ferida, and Amedeo Nazzari were associated with these films, and while not as expensively mounted as the earlier historical epics or as Hollywood films, the films began to bear a resemblance to their more polished Hollywood models. Blasetti, in particular, was able to enhance the genre, through reliance on narrative structures drawn from fairy tale, romance, and history, as well as from the Hollywood film. Lavish historical settings, glamorous characters, rapidly edited scenes of combat done in the style of Soviet montage, large casts, and beleaguered but victorious heroes are characteristic of such films and carriers of the films' ideological discourses.

Chapter Five unites a discussion of comedy with the particular representations of class relations and the roles of work and leisure in order to integrate the issue of generational and sexual conflicts to the broader social context represented within the fictional world. Although the comedies do not

directly confront political issues, many of the films, particularly those of Camerini, do provide in their strategies of evasion an oblique presentation of social and political contradictions. These films are highly informative about fascist ideology in its most subtle and pervasive aspects. For example, Camerini's films portray the struggles of "little" people to survive. His clerks, taxi drivers, and salespersons are at first lured by the seductions of upward mobility, wealth, and power, but the characters gradually learn the falsity of these aspirations and return to their own class and to the comforts of home, work, and personal enhancement. The films speak to the discontents and aspirations of workers, offering compensation for economic and class limitations through their romantic and comic structures. The visual style, the presence of stars such as Vittorio De Sica and Assia Noris, and the skillful handling of narrative, works, like the Hollywood film, to bind the audience to empty desire and illusory pleasure, made to appear inevitable and attractive. Images of tourism, play, sports, and entertainment are inserted as a way of dramatizing the pleasures of a modest and collective existence. The style of the films announces that the film as artifact also seeks to communicate the same spirit to its audiences. When work itself is actually portrayed, as in Ruttmann's film *Acciaio* (Steel), the emphasis is on the equation between labor, machinery, and natural imagery in order to naturalize industry and productivity.

Of the genres produced, the melodramas especially reveal the Italian cinema's growth in stylistic and technical competence, and the concluding chapter investigates the ways in which such films as *Ossessione*, *Gelosia*, *Sorelle Materassi*, *Morte civile*, and *Malombra* dramatize the breakdown of family ties and interpersonal relationships, the failure of self-discipline, and the fragility of conformity. They portray a world that is hostile, violent, hypocritical, unyielding, unredeemed and unredeemable, where privilege, status, and authority are corrupt. The treatment of obsession, unrequited love, madness, confused identity, impotence, isolation, and thwarted desire is central, and the films pursue these issues often without the